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Parts, service availability hamper county's EAS siren operation

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

After months of problems with many of Franklin County's 32 emergency alert sirens, Emergency Management Agency Director Mary Hallman-Glass said most are now operational after repairs to the system were made again last week.

After an extended effort to find a service provider willing to come to Franklin County to repair the emergency siren system, Hallman-Glass said Amory, Miss.-based Precision Communications came and fixed the

system's encoder.

A county-wide test last Monday resulted in an erroneous chemical spill warning being transmitted over the system, so Precision workers returned to install a new encoder this week.

A second test, this time at 9 a.m., Thursday morning, indicated some sirens are now receiving signals properly, but the Tharptown and East Franklin sirens did not function and Precision officials are working remotely to determine what the problem is.

While a majority of the 32 sirens

See 'SIRENS,' Page 7

Freemon's celebrates 20 years of keeping Franklin Countians fit

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

Randy and Evonne Freemon have been together since both were 14. Their marriage is a partnership that's withstood the test of time.

So it comes as no surprise that the couple's businesses, Freemon Marine and Freemon Fitness, were both built with that partnership in mind. Randy started repairing boats in 1987, learning the trade from his father, Cecil Freemon, and he turned that skill into a successful business after the shop he worked for closed.

Evonne's business is fitness, and she's a constant presence at Freemon Fitness, located next door to Freemon Marine on Highway 24

West in Russellville.



Evonne and Randy Freemon

Freemons' son Joe helped build the business working with clients needing physical therapy. He worked while he was in physical therapy

This year, Freemon Fitness is celebrating 20 years of business. It's truly a family affair, as the

See 'FREEMONS' Page 8

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**Faye Emerson Willingham, 71, of
Hopkinsville, KY passed away Saturday,
January 14, 2023. Akins Funeral Home
assisted the family.**

**Perry Royce Crowell, II, passed away Monday,
January 16, 2023. Spry Memorial Chapel
assisted the family.**

**Danny Lee Cook, a69, Bear Creek, AL. passed
away Wednesday January 18, 2023. Pinkard
Funeral Home assisted the family.**

**Peter Charles Stanley Steien, 38, of Littleville,
passed away January 17, 2023. Pinkard
Funeral Home assisted the family.**

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My Take On This...Letter Writing

Gail Motes
Franklin Free Press

Does anybody remember writing letters? As a newlywed, my husband's jobs took us from different places to live in Alabama and from state to state.

Throughout the traveling, I had very little opportunity to meet a lot of people. I only went to buy groceries or to the laundromat.

With a lot of time alone, I did a lot of letter writing to family, friends, and a few of my high school teachers.

After a while, I became very creative with my method of writing. The same routine was boring. That's when idea after idea began forming in my mind.

It would require more time, but I had plenty of free time. I had an ink pen with three colors of red, blue and black.

Sometimes, I would alternate each line with a different color. Other times, I'd write each word in red, next in blue, then in black and keep on with that pattern until the end of the letter.



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Correction Policy

The Franklin Free Press strives for excellence and accuracy, and we will be pleased to correct any error in our newspaper. To request a correction or clarification, call or e-mail our office.

Letters to the editor

The Franklin Free Press is published by hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The Franklin Free Press reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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The next letter, I'd write in a circle. It would start at the top of the paper and continue in a circle to the middle of the page.

At other times, I'd start in the center and work on writing in circles until I was at the outer circle. Those were the least favorite. I had a brother who told me he would just throw them away. I didn't send any more to him like that.

I would also write the letter from left to right and the next line from right to left. I'd continue alternating each line. I never gave information on how the letters should be read. The person would have to figure it out.

I got real creative one time and wrote my brother on toilet paper. Now, that took longer for me to write than it did to read. He said he enjoyed it because he used the toilet paper after he read the letter.

Well, I didn't stop there! My brother began dating so I wrote him a letter on the first page and his girlfriend the second page. I mailed each their pages. I did put a note on his letter to let him know he would have to be with his girlfriend to read the letter.

Believe it or not, but I occasionally wrote letters the old fashioned, boring way. After all the crazy letters I sent, that simple way was the popular one. My take on that is most people don't like change, don't have a good sense of humor or are too lazy to try something new. No ambition at all!

Needless to say, I read a lot more letters than I received, but this old girl sure did appreciate every one that was written to me. I know most of us have heard how it's the little things that matter. Well, that is spot on! Just knowing someone took the time to write always put a smile on my face.

I wrote one of my cousins several letters, but I always tried to answer the questions I'd ask her. I knew odds were good that I did not get an answer, but when the odds were in my favor, she would write me back to correct my wrong answers.

You know, I doubt if someone 30 years old or younger, would even know how to write a letter. They probably wouldn't know how to address it or which corner to put the stamp on.

Can't you just hear a younger person say, "they done that in the old days!" I might even be talking to a younger person when I get old and say to them, "I used to write articles in the Franklin Free Press back in my younger days."

Why not take this opportunity to write a friend, family, member, or a teacher, a letter and surprise them.

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Former Alabama QB tabbed as inaugural Belgreen FB coach

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

After reviewing 32 applications and conducting nine interviews for the new varsity football coaching position at Belgreen High School, Franklin County Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton made his hiring recommendation to the Franklin County Board of Education at its January 19th meeting. And, pardon the mixed sports metaphors, but Hamilton believes it's a home run hire.

The board approved hiring former University of Alabama quarterback Luke Tucker as the man to take the reins of the Bulldog varsity football program.

Last year, Franklin County Schools officials notified the Alabama High School Athletic Association of their intent to begin a football program in Fall 2023. Belgreen will start with the required two years of non-varsity competition before playing a region schedule beginning in 2025.

Last year, the Franklin County Board of Education approved a \$1.5 million private donation to be used for construction of a stadium with track and field facilities along with football.

Florence-based Eagle Golf and Athletics, Inc., received the contract to construct the facility. The first phase will be completion of a track and practice field. Bleachers, a press box and field house will come in later phases, Hamilton said.

Work is underway on the project, with hopes of having it ready for use in the Fall of 2023.

The Belgreen stadium will benefit all county schools by providing a track and field facility capable of hosting track meets either for individual schools or regional or county events.

Belgreen is classified as a 1A school by the AHSAA. With last year's enrollment of 159 students from 9-12 grade, the school is the second smallest Franklin County high school, ahead of only Vina, with 94 students.

As anticipation grows for football to make its debut at Belgreen, Hamilton said he wanted to find the right fit of a coach with experience and the vision to embrace the challenge of starting a new program. And

Hamilton says he's found both in Tucker.

Tucker served as varsity football coach at Dale County High School in Midland City, Al., the past two seasons, where his teams compiled a 6014 record. Tucker is the youngest son of Waldon Tucker, the Hall of Fame varsity football coach at Fayette County High School.

Tucker's brother Lance serves as head coach at Bartlett High School in Memphis. Luke served as defensive coordinator at Fayette County for seven years before taking the same post at Bartlett.

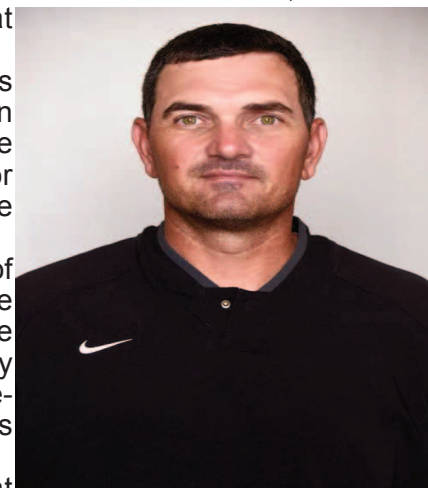
Tucker attended the University of Alabama where he was a reserve quarterback for the Crimson Tide. He later transferred to Auburn University Montgomery, where he played baseball and earned his Bachelor's degree.

As an All-State quarterback at Fayette County, Tucker's team won the 4A state championship in 1996.

He threw for 2,700 yards and 22 touchdowns his senior season, and had 7,428 yards and 53 TDs in his high school career.

Tucker later earned his Master's degree from the University of West Alabama.

He and his wife Lori have two sons, Colton and Camden.



COURTESY PHOTO

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Belgreen High School, NW-SCC partner in dual enrollment courses

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

As they move into the next phase of their education, Belgreen High School seniors can begin college with credit for up to six core classes thanks to a dual enrollment program through Northwest-Shoals Community College.

The Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit Program was already in place at Belgreen for Childhood Development, through which students can earn a Child Development Associate credential and the minimum requirements to be an auxiliary teacher in the state-funded Pre-Kindergarten program. That dual credit program began in 2019.

Last fall, Belgreen and NW-SCC partnered to offer dual enrollment courses in important Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, or STEM, subjects. These courses were available to rising seniors.

Belgreen seniors were given the opportunity to enroll in English 101, 102, Math 112, 113 and Biology 1 and 2 dual enrollment courses that can earn them both high school and college credit. The courses count toward their high school graduation credits and remain a part of their regular college transcript, whether they attend NW-SCC or another college that accepts the transfer of the credits.

This can be significant in helping a student build a foundation for academic success in college, with a maximum of 18 hours of up to 4.0 credits.

In order to participate in dual enrollment, students must meet the requirements of post-secondary education, have at least a 2.5 unweighted grade point average and obtain written approval from their principal or school counselor.

They must earn at least a 'C' or better in all attempted college courses for them to transfer, according to NW-SCC Dual Enrollment guidelines.

Seniors can enroll in two classes per semester free of charge. If they take a third dual enrollment course, they are charged for that three-hour credit through NW-SCC.

After an email was sent to Belgreen faculty to see who would be interested in teaching a dual enrollment course, English teacher Teresa Whitten answered the call, as did math teacher Austin Oldag and science teacher Jennifer Cooper.

A 21-year teaching veteran, Whitten liked the idea of teaching a class of motivated students looking to build their college transcript.

"I like a challenge and have thought sometime I'd really like to teach at the college level because the kids want to do the work to succeed," Whitten said. "It's refreshing knowing every student in that class is going to turn in their work

and try and put forth the best effort because they want to do well. That's the biggest difference between college and high school—you have those kids who want to do the work, and you don't have to persuade them to put in the work. These dual enrollment classes have been the highlight of my year for sure," she added.

Franklin County Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton said his system is committed to the dual enrollment program because of how it can prepare students for the college level of their educational path.

"It allows them to get a jump start on their college career and also shows them they can be successful with a college curriculum," Hamilton said. "Anything we can do to ease the transition of our students from high school to college is worth doing," he added.

Whitten stresses the development of writing skills in her dual enrollment English class. This year's senior class went through two academic years impacted by COVID-19. Part of that fallout was, in many cases, writing skills that didn't develop like they ordinarily would in a classroom setting.

"When we first started in the fall, some of their writing was not where it should be, so English 101 focused on learning how to write argumentative essays and informative writing," Whitten said. "Their improvement has been great and I'm very pleased with how much they accomplished to get to where they can sit down and write a college-level paper.

"Students need to learn formal writing as opposed to texting and being conversational with friends. When I gave them back their first essays, the papers looked like a bloodbath. Their mouths dropped and I just told them to revise it and learn from their mistakes. As the term progressed, their writing got so much better. It's been a really good awakening for them. In college, you don't just write in English. You have papers and essays assigned in different subjects and this year really woke them up as to what to expect in college," she added.

11 Belgreen seniors enrolled in Whitten's two dual enrollment English classes this year. Sign up for the 2023-24 dual enrollment courses will take place near the end of the spring semester, Whitten said. Northwest-Shoals officials will come and talk to students about the program and about transfer scholarships from NW-SCC to other colleges.

Regardless of a student's degree path, basic courses including English, math and biology are often required, so those students with dual enrollment credits enter college ahead of other students.

For more information on NW-SCC's dual enrollment program, log onto www.nwsc.edu, click on Programs, then select "Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit."

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 **T**he Senior Center at Phil Campbell is under new management. The Town of Phil Campbell would like to invite and encourage everyone in our area that is 60 years and older to come be a part of the group. This is for men and women. They meet at the Phil Campbell Community Center Monday thru Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00. A delicious lunch is served around 11:00 a.m. Come on out and join in on the games or just sit and have a cup of coffee and socialize!! So if you, your parents, grandparents or your neighbor is 60 or older, pass the word and come out and enjoy a morning of f

 **T**he Church of God in Phil Campbell invites you to Revival, beginning February 6, 2023, at 6 p.m., with Mary Shalton and Bro. Billy Barlty. The church is located at 77 Mars Hill Road in Phil Campbell. For more information, please call 256-324-5288.

 **T**he Cowboy Church of Franklin County will host a "I Promise" Ladies Conference, free for ladies of all ages, March 10, 2023, from 6-9 p.m., and March 11, 2023, from 9 a.m.-12 p.m. Come for a meal, music and a message! Church is located at 25100 Highway 24, Russellville.

 **T**he Cowboy Church of Franklin County is hosting "Love Month" all through February. Their speaker for every Sunday in February will be Jennifer Welch. She will be speaking about love. You won't want to miss this! The church is located at 25100 Highway 24 West in Russellville. Everyone invited!

 **P**urpose will be singing at Gateway Church of God on January 29, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. They will be debuting their new project. Everyone is invited.

 **T**he next meeting of the Franklin County Community Development Commission will be Friday, March 31, 2023, at 8:30 a.m., at the Franklin County Courthouse Annex. All grant requests must be submitted to a member of the commission by Friday, March 24, 2023, at 12 p.m. Commission members include Brad Bolton, Jeremy Campbell and David Grissom.

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'SIRENS,' from Page 1

are operational, Hallman-Glass said there are several that remain in need of repair.

Franklin County EMA maintains nine of the 32 sirens. The remaining 23 are the responsibility of the municipality in which they are located. Russellville has 11 sirens in the city. Red Bay has six, Hodges and Vina two each and there are two maintained by the Town of Phil Campbell.

"As of right now, all of the county sirens are supposed to be working except East Franklin and they are preparing a quote to fix it," Hallman-Glass said. "If the sirens for the cities are not working properly, those cities and towns are responsible for fixing them."

Hallman-Glass said five of the six Red Bay sirens have been repaired and parts have been ordered for the one that's not operational.

The siren at Northwest-Shoals Community College was struck by lightning, Hallman-Glass said, and Phil Campbell officials are waiting on a quote to repair it.

In Hodges, the town's two sirens are not operational, and officials have turned in a work order to repair them. The delays result from companies unwilling to come to Franklin County to do repairs.

"Precision is the only company we know of in the surrounding area willing to do on-site repairs. There's another company who can only do minor repairs but we don't want to have to pay twice if they can't do the work," Hallman-Glass said.

The county's Emergency Operations Center is where weather and/or emergency alerts originate. That system is controlled by an encoder, which was replaced this week. Hallman-Glass said the sirens are controlled from the EOC.

"We received a grant for the installation of the siren system and each city got their sirens through that grant, but they took over responsibility of maintenance once they were installed," Hallman-Glass said.



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Franklin County BOE approves advanced TEAMS contract for Strickland

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Board of Education approved an advanced contract for Teresa Strickland at the board's January 19th meeting.

The contract, which runs through June 15, 2027, comes through the Teacher Excellence and Accountability for Mathematics and Science (TEAMS) program, created to encourage more teachers to become certified in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) subjects.

In other agenda items, the board:
--approved an increase in mileage rate reimbursement for privately owned vehicles on official business from 62.5 cents per mile effective January 1, 2023.

--approved compensation agreement paying Sherry Smith, Yearbook Sponsor at East Franklin Junior High School \$900 in compensation for yearbook supplement for the 2022-2023 year only, per recommendation by EFJH Principal Leann Trapp. EFJH will reimburse the Franklin County Board of Education the \$900 plus applicable benefits.

--approved the members of the Textbook Committee for Architecture and Construction and Distribution & Logistics, including Paul Humphres, Steve Watts, Todd Johnson, Lori Hardin and Jonathan King.

--approved out-of-state trips for Belgreen Scholar's Bowl Team to Small School National Championship Tournament, Rosemont, Ill., April 28-May 1, 2023, Red Bay sixth grade to Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum, Ruby Falls, Rock City, Incline Railway in Chattanooga, April 28, 2023, Phil Campbell seniors to New York, New York, May 17-21, 2023, Tharptown 11th and 12th grade to New York, New York, May 17-21, 2023, Belgreen junior high and varsity baseball games in Tremont, Miss., March 23, 2023 and Belgreen varsity basketball games in Tremont, January 27, 2023.

--approved personnel moves including:
--Resignation: Melissa Renee Colburn, part-time custodian, EFJH, Susie Tverberg, teacher and head softball coach Belgreen, Jakelin Gonzalez, special education aide, Franklin County Schools.

--Employment: David Ward, head EFJH baseball coach, Luke Tucker, Belgreen varsity football coach and strength & conditioning teacher, Lori Tucker, special education teacher Belgreen, Sander Tverberg, head softball coach Belgreen, Duston King, bus driver, Angela Gilliland, temporary bus driver, Heather Sibley, PCES teacher, Monika Thorn, special education aide, Morgan McCarley, special education teacher, PCHS and Briana Dean, receptionist, Central Office.

--Leave of Absence: Jessica Kennerly, teacher's aide Belgreen, through March 15, 2023.

--Volunteers: Traci Britton, Kailee Simpson, Belgreen softball coaches and Tynes Channel, Caden Parker, Belgreen baseball coaches.

--Teacher Substitutes: Tori Bass, Brittney Roccato, Casey Hill (Certified) and Sarah Sharp.

The next meeting of the FCBOE will be February 28, 2023, with work session at 5 p.m., and meeting to follow.

'FREEMON'S,' from Page 1

school and brought in a number of older clients who went on to join the gym.

Evonne has the gym set up for everyone, regardless of fitness level or experience, to succeed. She meets new members and gives them a tour of the facility and explains how the various machines work. Freemon helps new members make a workout sheet they can follow just by looking at the number on each machine.

"We try to help them get started with a 6-8 week program where they can get used to the machines. All they've got to do is find the number and workout. We help people who aren't familiar with working out," Freemon said. "We also have Rickey Smith who offers personal training if they want that kind of service."

Smith, a fitness specialist who owns Personal Touch Fitness, joined Freemon's shortly after it opened. Soon thereafter, he asked Freemon if he could train his clients there and Evonne said he could.

"The reason I wanted to join and train clients here is because it's so clean," Smith said. "They are cleaning everyday. I've trained people for over 40 years and Freemon's is the cleanest gym I've ever trained in."

"They have the best equipment you could ask for. They're always adding new pieces of equipment as well. Evonne is super nice and runs a tight ship. No one gets in unless you're a member or needing a tour if you're thinking about joining. She's very accommodating and bends over backwards for her members," he added.

When Randy first opened Freemon Marine, he tried to get Evonne to work with him but that turned out to be 'too much togetherness.' With the two businesses next to each other, there's at least a little distance between them during the day.

Each year, Evonne makes some improvement to Freemon's Fitness. Through the years, she's added shower facilities, and she regularly adds new equipment.

"The neatest thing about being in business 20 years is the kids we first signed up when we opened are now starting to sign their kids up. We've watched a whole generation grow," Evonne said.

"We have great customer loyalty. Our long-time members like the atmosphere and cleanliness. We make sure if someone sends their kids up here there will be a good, safe environment for everybody," she added.

Regardless of your fitness level, Evonne said Freemon's Fitness offers a relaxed, non-judgmental environment to workout.

"Some women worry about what if they do something wrong or aren't able to do too much, but everyone does their own thing here," Evonne said. "If you need a hand, most of our members are more than glad to help you, but nobody's watching to see how much of a workout you're doing."

Freemon Marine and Freemon's Fitness are successful in large part because Randy and Evonne are teammates in providing a safe, clean place to workout and fair and honest repair service on boats.

Although Randy's father passed away two years ago, Cecil Freemon lives on through the work ethic he taught his son.

"I started fixing lawn mowers with my dad. He was my biggest influence. My dad instilled in me his work ethic and taught me how to work on just about anything," Randy said.

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Golden Tiger boys clinch Area 15 title

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Once again, the Russellville High School girls varsity basketball team played a strong first half in an area game.

After being blown out by West Point earlier this season, Coach Jermaine Groce's team controlled the first eight minutes, aided by poor shooting from the Warriors.

Russellville led 13-11 after one, and trailed by three, 22-19, at halftime.

That's where West Point took over, outscoring the Golden Tigers 17-8 in the third. Russellville held its own in the final eight minutes, but came home with a loss, 50-40.

While pleased with the way his team started, Groce talked after the game about the need to finish.

"We are a team on the rise. I believe we are playing better," Groce said. "We just have to get together and finish games by playing smart basketball and communicating on defense."

The Golden Tigers are now 8-13, 1-4 in 5A Area 15 play. Russellville will host Haleyville on Tuesday, Jan. 24th.

Jacey Moore led the Golden Tigers with 12 points. Ella Copeland had eight, Laila Hill six, Anna Beth Oliver and Avery Watts five apiece and Jenna Whitfield four.

West Point was led by its two talented pairs of sisters. Laiklen and Liberty Shadix combined for 25 points and Camryn and Jaelyn Faulkner combined for 16.

BOYS VARSITY: RHS 81, West Point 72.

See, 'RHS,' page 15

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Vina seniors key win on 'Senior Night'

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Vina varsity boys basketball coach Randy Barnes talks about his five senior players, you can hear his voice start to crack.

In his second year as basketball coach, Barnes had only one senior last year, so he knew the importance of building a good working relationship with his large junior class.

Those five players, Nate Stidham, Conner Davidson, Quinton Lawler, Hunter Griffith and Jace Johnson, embraced their role as leaders this year and the results of their efforts have paid off.

With three weeks remaining in the season, Vina's eight wins are the most in



COURTESY PHOTO

Vina seniors, from left: Jace Johnson, Hunter Griffith, Quinton Lawler, Conner Davidson and Nate Stidham with Coach Randy Barnes. the last decade for the night, it was Senior Night and those five

When the Red Devils hosted Berry Tuesday recognition they

deserved for their commitment to the program.

And they contributed heavily to Vina's 72-61 victory, making it a Senior Night to remember.

Stidham (28 points), Davidson (22) and Griffith (18), had 68 of the Red Devils' 72 points as Vina pulled away late in a close game, something the team hasn't done particularly well this season.

"We've had five games where we were either tied or had four or five lead changes in the fourth quarter, but we haven't done well finishing those games," Barnes said. "We finally pulled one out against Berry."

Vina led 48-46 after three quarters. That lead grew to

See, 'VINA,' page 12

Ward to lead East Franklin baseball program

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Greg Hamilton wanted the new East Franklin Junior High School baseball coach to have a strong knowledge of the game and the ability to teach fundamentals.

The Franklin County Schools Superintendent found all that and more with the hiring of former Russellville High School varsity baseball coach David Ward.

Ward's hiring was approved by the Franklin County Board of Education at its January 19th meeting. Ward follows former EFJH coach Jason Cooper, who transferred to Tharptown High School last fall.

Ward, who is retired from Alabama and vested in Tennessee, will receive a coaching supplement but will be in a part-time capacity only.

"You won't find anyone who knows more about baseball than Coach Ward. He'll get them the reps and knowledge they need. He's worked for me before and he knows the game, knows how to teach it and how to work the kids and that's what you look for in a coach," Hamilton said.

Ward, a member of the Colbert County Sports Hall of Fame, was a talented four-sport athlete at Colbert Heights High School in the late 1970s. After graduation, he attended the University of North Alabama where he played baseball and football. Ward played his final year of eligibility in baseball at Calhoun Community College, where he was an All-Conference selection.

Ward was drafted by the Atlanta Braves organization in 1983, but chose to finish his education.

See, 'WARD,' page 15



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'VINA,' from Page 11

six with three minutes left when Barnes called a time out. "I told them to remind themselves of the way they felt after all those close losses. This was the time to do something about. They responded well and went on a 5-0 run out of the time out to put the game away," Barnes said.

"These seniors played their hearts out and the score in the end reflected it."

Barnes continues to be impressed with his senior leadership, in particular their dedication to the program and to constantly improve their games.

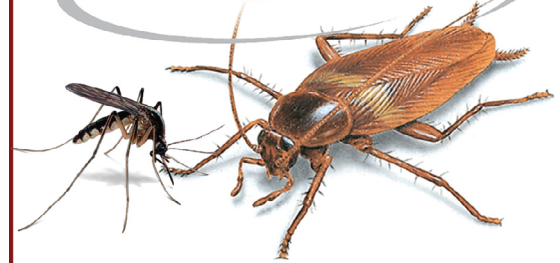
"These kids are always there at practice. They hardly complain and they set a great example for our younger kids and always have done so," Barnes said. "That helps me and our team stay motivated to move forward and continue to get better."

Vina's seniors are far from done on their home court though.

Starting with the Berry game, Vina's will close out the regular season with eight consecutive home games.

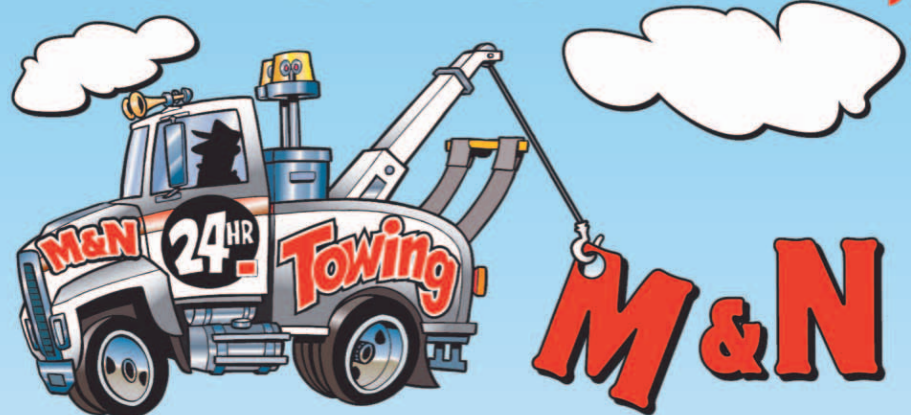
They will host Tremont Monday, January 23rd and Belgreen the next day. The Red Devils' homestand continues January 27th when Lynn comes to town, followed by a visit from Brilliant January 31st, Hubbertville on February 2nd and Waterloo on February 3rd.

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Morgan, Velasquez named as RHS Bryant-Jordan nominees

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Two Russellville High School seniors were selected recently to represent their school in the annual Bryant-Jordan Foundation scholarship program.

Sarah Ann Morgan received RHS' Scholar-Athlete Award nomination and Yamilson Velasquez will represent Russellville as the nominee for the Achievement Award.

Schools that participate in the Alabama High School Athletic Association are eligible to nominate one student annually for each award.

The school nominations are the first step in what could lead to thousands of dollars in scholarships should the two students advance to the regional level.

Velasquez was nominated by RHS Principal Jeremy Madden for the Bryant-Jordan Achievement Award.

On Friday, RHS officials learned that Morgan has been named the Class 5A Region Scholar-Athlete Award winner. That means Morgan will be one of seven finalists for the overall award.

This award honors high school seniors who have achieved success 'relative to their ability or who may have overcome an unusual hardship.'

Selection criteria include academic performance relative to ability, sports involvement, athletic honors, student leadership and civic or church leadership.

ACHIEVEMENT AWARD: YAMILSON VELASQUEZ

Velasquez, a four-year soccer athlete and two-year cross country team member, has a weighted grade point average of 4.3. Velasquez helped lead Coach Trey Stanford's varsity soccer team to back-to-back area titles and state runner-up finishes.

In his junior year, Velasquez earned second team All-State honors as a midfielder and scored the winning goal in double overtime to send Russellville to the state finals.

Velasquez also holds the school record in cross-country (17:24) and a two-time state qualifier.

Velasquez has been active in the Hispanic Heritage Committee and the annual Hispanic Heritage Celebration each of his four years at RHS. He's active in the Bethania Iglesia Youth Group and attended the Lighthouse Church Camp four years.

In his letter of recommendation, Stanford described the type of person he knows Velasquez to be.

"He is willing to put everyone else ahead of himself in everything he does.

This is what honestly separates him from so many others," Stanford said.

SCHOLAR-ATHLETE AWARD:

SARAH ANN MORGAN

The Bryant-Jordan Scholar-Athlete Award honors seniors who both excel as athletes and as students. Selection considerations include scholastic standing, sports involvement, athletic honors, student leadership and civic/church leadership.

Morgan has a weighted GPA of 5.0 and scored an eye-popping 32 on the ACT. She ranks number one in her senior class.

Morgan will earn an Honors Diploma and has a 4.0 GPA in more than 35 hours of college dual enrollment courses from Northwest-Shoals Community College. She has been awarded a full scholarship, the Scholars Plus Award, to Troy University.

Her academic honors are many, including Northwest Alabama Distinguished Young Women Best Scholastics Award, College Board AP Scholar with Honors, ACT 30-plus Club and Top 2% ACT Test Taker in Alabama, National Honor Society member and certification in Microsoft Office Specialist.

Morgan has been a varsity cheerleader three years and was on the junior varsity squad as a freshman. She has served as varsity cheer captain and media specialist and was the first RHS student to receive a perfect score at cheerleader tryouts.

She's president of the National Honor Society, Key Club President, Yearbook Editor and National Technical Honor Society Secretary.

She was chosen for the Junior Leadership Program and has volunteered at a local mission as part of her more than 200 hours of community service.

"Sarah is kind, friendly and has an extremely strong work ethic. She is one of the most driven students I have ever seen in my public education career. She has my highest recommendation for this award," Madden said in his recommendation letter.

The next step was the area competition, where a committee of principals selected who will represent the area.

Region level nominations were next and only one winner advances from each region.

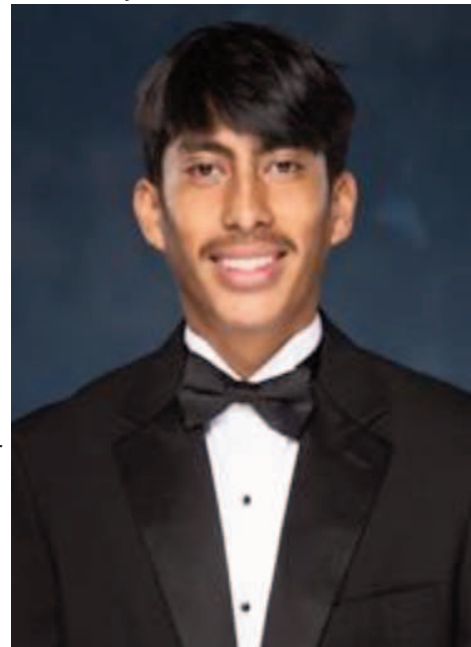
The region winners will be presented to a selection committee that will determine the winner in each class from 1A-7A.

Earning regional honors comes with a \$3,000 scholarship for each student.

The seven class winners of each award will receive an additional \$3,500 scholarship and the overall Scholar-Athlete and Achievement Award winner will receive an additional \$4,000 scholarship.

The Bryant-Jordan Foundation has awarded more than \$10.8 million in scholarships to more than 3,300 Alabama high school seniors.

The 38th annual Bryant-Jordan Foundation Awards Banquet will be held on April 10, 2023, in Birmingham.



Yamilson Velasquez



Sarah Ann Morgan

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Berry bringing 'Love Songs & Stories' Feb. 2nd to Decatur's Princess Theatre

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

With 20 songs in the Top 40, including six Top 5 hits, John Berry's musical career spans four decades.

His first hit, Your Love Amazes Me, soared to #1 on Billboard and Radio & Records Country Charts in 1994. 34 years later, Berry landed on the Top 30 Billboard Country Chart with Beautifully Broken.

He and his wife Robin have hosted a television show. He released a Christian music CD in 2011, and reached #1 on the Christian Music Weekly Country Chart in 2020 with Don't Think I Ain't Country, a song he co-wrote with Bill Anderson.

Berry will host An Evening of Love Songs and Stories with John Berry on Thursday, February 2, at Decatur's Princess Theatre. Tickets are \$40, \$35 and \$30, and may be purchased through the theatre's website, www.princessstheatre.org.

But Berry's life over the past 42 years hasn't been all wine and roses. He's been through a different life crisis in each decade since the 1980s. Each one tested his faith and created unique challenges. And the 63-year-old Berry weathered each storm through faith and family.

Last year, Berry released a faith-based album, Find My Joy, on the Gaither Music Label, a project that was on his 'To Do' list for a while.

"I've wanted to cut this record for years, but the opportunity was never there," Berry said. "So I went through cancer, came out on the other side of that in good health, with a grateful heart, and decided to cut the record."

Berry continues to keep a busy tour schedule that includes dates in churches as well as solo and band dates, along with his popular Christmas tour and the special Valentine's Day show he'll do in Decatur. The night will include some of Berry's favorite love songs, including his releases and those of other artists.

"I'll have the band with me and we're going to do a mix of songs that are mine and some by others," Berry said. "It will feature the greatest love songs we can come up with. We're going on a Grand Ole Opry cruise next week and the band and I will figure out what songs we'll do for the Decatur show."

In 1981, Berry was two years into his recording career when he was involved in a serious accident on his motorcycle. Left with two broken legs and a broken hip, there was no certainty he'd walk again. All of this shortly after his mother had passed away.

Berry accepted the challenge life presented him, worked hard in physical therapy and spent months doing the only thing his body allowed—sitting on a stool playing guitar.

In 1994, on the very same day Your Love Amazes Me reached #1, Berry had surgery to remove a tumor in his brain. Although it was benign, the growth markedly impacted Berry's personality and brain function before it was removed.

Three years later, Berry underwent surgery to remove nodes on his vocal cords, a dicey surgery for someone whose livelihood depends on his voice.

The 2000s saw Berry incur serious injuries in a horseback riding accident. His broken shoulder required extensive therapy causing another lapse in his music career.

In 2018, Berry was on tour celebrating the 25th anniversary of signing his major record deal. His television show, Songs and Stories with John Berry, was in its second year, and he returned to the country charts with Beautifully Broken.

As the calendar turned to 2019, Berry was diagnosed with cancer of the tonsils and he underwent surgery to remove them. Chemotherapy and 35 rounds of radiation replaced concerts and television shows. Incredibly, by summer 2019, Berry returned to the road and resumed his busy schedule.

"When I got the cancer diagnosis, I was like, come on, how much more is there? I'd been through the motorcycle wreck, vocal cord surgery, etc. We were laying in bed when told my wife I had been diagnosed with cancer. I said God's trying to get my attention for something," Berry said.

"Robin turned over and said 'would you please listen this time?,' so I tried to do just that," he added.

With his latest health crisis behind him, Berry's career would again be interrupted, this time by a worldwide pandemic in 2020.

"I was ready to get back to it but COVID shut everything down. We had to get creative and continue our connection with people, so we thought about all the children out of school and started Sunday Songs and Stories with Papa Bear," Berry said.

The free internet show was geared for children ages 3-6. Berry asked the kids how their weeks were going, encouraged them to be safe and keep their hands washed, and he read a different story each week. While Berry read, Robin showed the images of the pages. The Papa Bear videos are available on YouTube.

At his son's urging, Berry re-recorded one of his early songs, The Graduation Song, originally released in 1981. He posted on Facebook about the project and asked people to send in photos of their graduating seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic to honor the Class of 2020, most of whom didn't get to enjoy a real graduation ceremony.

His video for the song was shot at Gallatin High School, using its empty hallways and gymnasium for scenery. The result was a touching tribute to the Class of 2020 and yet another way Berry found to reach out to his fans.

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'WARD,' from Page 11

His 25-year baseball coaching career saw Ward coach at Collinwood, Tenn., Colbert Heights, Northwest Junior College and Russellville High School. He was named 5A Coach of the Year by the Alabama Sports Writers Association in 2007, after the Golden Tigers reached the state semifinals.

That 2007 team amassed a school-record 42 wins. Ward's RHS team won 33 games in 2008 and 34 wins in 2011.

When Ward's oldest son Jake was hired to coach baseball at Vina High School, Ward served in a volunteer coaching role for the Red Devils.

Ward also worked in Georgia, where he was part of the coaching staff of the East Cobb Astros and Los Angeles Dodgers, scout teams comprised of Division One draftees.

With the majority of East Franklin's enrollment feeding into Phil Campbell High School, which has seen tremendous baseball success, Ward's focus will be preparing his players for the next level.

"Most of our kids will go to Phil Campbell High School and I can help them develop their games to be part of that program," Ward said. "It's about generating interest here in the baseball program. We don't have a field to play home games on, so our schedule is all away games.

"But the interest is here. We started practicing and have 16 kids on the team. There are some athletes out there. The thing we've got to do is focus on fundamentals. These kids will be ready," he added.

Those who've seen Ward coach will likely describe his coaching style as 'intense,' but he says those fiery days are now behind him.

"I've definitely mellowed in recent years. There were times I wouldn't have played for me. But the passion and respect for the game of baseball will always be there," Ward said.

East Franklin will open its season at Hatton on February 16, followed by trips to Hackleburg (Feb. 21), Vina (Feb. 24) and Belgreen (Feb. 27). All games will be doubleheaders, Ward said.



COURTESY PHOTO

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out on the web at www.franklinfreepress.net!

'RHS,' from Page 11

Coach Patrick Odom's boys varsity basketball team scored a key win at West Point, 81-72. The Golden Tigers clinched the 5A Area 15 regular season championship with the win, and will host the area tournament next month.

Russellville improved to 12-9, and was led by Malachi Duncan's 21 points. Amir Williams had 16 and Gavin Hyde 15.

After playing Haleyville January 24th, the Golden Tigers will host Lawrence County Friday, January 27th and Red Bay on January 30th.

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